

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A  
Is 49:3, 5-6  
Ps 40 *passim*  
1Cor 1:1-3  
Jn 1:29-34

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Father [Name] and I are wearing green today because we've entered into a new liturgical season, the one called Ordinary Time. Each season of the liturgical year has an overarching theme. The year began with Advent, which led us into the Christmas season. Advent and Christmas are about the mystery of the Incarnation, of God with us as one of us, the flesh-and-blood God. Toward the end of February we'll begin the Lenten season, which is all about sanctification and repentance, followed by Easter, which focuses on redemption and the promise of glory. In between times, we have this season called Ordinary Time, the green season. And the great theme of Ordinary Time is discipleship: what does it mean to follow Jesus?

"Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." That's how John the Baptist introduced Jesus in today's Gospel. "The Lamb of God." Where did that come from? What did the people John was talking to think when they heard him call Jesus the Lamb of God?

They might have thought about Abraham and Isaac [*Gn 22:1-14*]. Abraham thought, mistakenly, that God wanted him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. They traveled for several days and as they approached the place of sacrifice Isaac asked, "Where is the lamb for sacrifice?" and Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb." And that's just what God did: God himself provided the lamb of sacrifice.

It's likely too that their thoughts turned to the meal God ordered the Israelites to eat on the night of Passover, right before they fled Egypt, the land of their enslavement [*Ex 12:1-13*]. The centerpiece of the meal was an unblemished lamb, roasted whole. Interestingly, the text says "[Y]ou may take it from the sheep or from the goats" [*Ex 12:5b*]. Apparently, "lamb" was a broader, more comprehensive word than it is today.

And if the young of a goat can be thought of as a lamb, then it's possible, I suppose, that when John the Baptist's listeners heard "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," they thought about the scapegoat. The Book of Leviticus [*Lv 16:10, 21-22*] prescribes that each year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest was to take hold of a live goat, confess all the iniquities of the people, all their transgressions and sins, over the goat's head, and drive it into the wilderness. Ritually – nowadays, I suppose, we would say virtually – the high priest would transfer the brokenness of the world onto the goat, and the goat would carry the guilt of the people away.

In our second reading today St. Paul begins his first letter to the Church in Corinth. For the next few Sundays, up until Lent, we will hear from the first three chapters of First Corinthians. Today we get the salutation, as if St. Paul is saying “Dear Corinthians” but in a very elaborate way. He identifies himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus.” “Apostle” means one who is sent, but apostles were special, because an apostle was sent with the authority of the one doing the sending. And that one Paul identifies as Christ Jesus. In these three short verses Paul names Jesus four times, and each time he couples it with the title Christ. *Christos* in Greek means “anointed one.” The same word in Hebrew is Messiah. And thus Paul kept proclaiming Jesus as the savior for whom the Jews had been waiting for so long.

Based on various Hebrew Scriptures, the people had different expectations of the Messiah. Sometimes the Messiah was seen as a king like David and Solomon; at other times people expected a prophet, or a priest. The first reading we heard this morning is called the Servant Song. The Song, sung by Isaiah, emphasizes the Messiah as a channel and instrument of God’s glory, not just for Israel but for all the nations reaching “to the ends of the earth.” Other passages from Isaiah depict the Messiah as the so-called Suffering Servant. One of those Suffering Servant songs is chapter 53, where Isaiah presents the Messiah as so disfigured we can’t bear to look at him. He suffers because “he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; . . . he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. . . . The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, . . . he did not open his mouth” [*Is 53:5-7*].

In dying Jesus showed us that the evil in the world, the evil in ourselves, does not win out in the end. He died living the message, as St. Matthew reports, “Blessed are the meek” [*Mt 5:5*]. I wonder if, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, a better, more fitting word than meek is non-violent. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Lamb of God whom John the Baptist pointed us to, is a model of non-violence.

Tomorrow we remember an apostle of non-violence. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of the four Americans Pope Francis extolled when he spoke to the U.S. Congress in 2015. Dr. King died a violent death in the cause of justice and for the principle of non-violence. Pope Francis evoked and honored Dr. King’s noble dream of a world where everyone – *everyone* – gets to flourish and is rewarded according to the content of his or her character.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world: be our model and our guide throughout this green season and beyond. Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us and grant us peace.